

March 12, 2010

Testimony of Eric Hammerling, Executive Director, Connecticut Forest & Park Association

Proposed Bills	Support/ Oppose
S.B. 116: AN ACT CONCERNING CAMPING FEES PAID BY STATE RESIDENTS AND NONRESIDENTS AND AUTHORIZING CERTAIN HUNTING OF DEER BY PISTOL	Support
S.B. 388: AN ACT CONCERNING CONNECTICUT'S ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL FUTURE	Support
H.B. 5417: AN ACT CONCERNING OPEN SPACE AND THE CREATION OF TRAILS FOR ALL-TERRAIN VEHICLES	Oppose Sects 3 & 4
H.B. 5419: AN ACT CONCERNING FARMS, FOOD AND JOBS	Support
H.B. 5420: AN ACT CONCERNING THE TRANSITION FROM THE TEN MIL PROGRAM IN 2011	Support

Chairmen Roy, Meyer, and Members of the Environment Committee:

My name is Eric Hammerling and I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Forest & Park Association, the first conservation organization established in Connecticut in 1895. CFPA has offered testimony before the Legislature on issues such as sustainable forestry, state parks and forests, trail recreation, natural resource protection, and land conservation every year since 1897.

S.B. 116

Although we do not have a strongly held position with regard to deer hunting by pistol or revolver, we are quite supportive of efforts to reduce camping fees (which doubled on October 1, 2009). For unimproved sites, camping fees for residents and non-residents increased from \$11 to \$22 per camping permit, and for improved sites, fees increased from \$13 or \$15 per site to \$26 or \$30 per site. This bill would reduce the increase from 100% to 20% greater than last year's level for in-state campers. Non-resident campers would experience a reduction from a 100% increase to only a 50% increase. This would certainly be an improvement from the current situation.

S.B. 388

CFPA supports the entire bill, but I will highlight a few of CFPA's priorities in the forestry, parks, Greenways, and wildlife habitat conservation sections of this bill. In particular, we strongly support the protection of funds raised by the state through Long Island Sound, Wildlife, and Greenways commemorative number plates. We strongly support Section 7 which (re)institutes a Conservation Fund and the maintenance, repair and improvement subaccount to support park activities. Lastly, we strongly support the creation of a "timber harvesting revolving fund" that would provide funding which would allow DEP Forestry and contracted private certified foresters develop forest management plans and conduct sustainable harvests on state forest lands. Amazingly, only about 30% of our state forests

have up to date management plans, and there are tens of thousands of acres with no one managing them at all (see attached graphic). At the same time, an October, 2008 Yale School of Forestry Study suggests that annual harvest levels on state lands could be 9-10 million board feet for the next 50 years (approximately triple the current rates of harvest) AND be ecologically sustainable. This would raise revenues, create jobs, and improve forest health and wildlife habitats at a critical time for our state.

H.B. 5417

We are concerned that Sections 3 and 4 were inserted into this otherwise good bill that we would normally support. The sections should be promptly removed. Last year, CFPA's Trails Committee took the unprecedented action of de-blazing a section of Blue-Blazed Hiking Trail at the Pachaug State Forest. Why did we take this dramatic action? Illegal ATV usage had turned a formerly well-maintained trail into a rutted, eroding, trashed racecourse. Where is the budget at the DEP for the heavy machinery that would be required to both create and maintain the ATV trails that this bill would compel them to build? Aren't we putting the motorcart before the horse?

To deal with illegal ATV use over the past 5 years, DEP conservation officers have spent over 6,000 hours responding to almost 2,500 incidents/complaints. They have issued over 1,500 infractions despite only having three officers dedicated to recreational vehicle enforcement. A recent study by Baystate Environmental Consultants for the DEP last April states that ATV traffic can "change the speed, timing, quantity, and quality of water moving through the landscape ; reduce perennial and annual plant cover and density, and the overall above ground biomass; expose or directly damage the shallow root systems of our white pine and eastern hemlock forests (common in CT); significantly reduced biota, specifically declines in arthropods, lizards, and mammals with only low levels of ATV use; and that areas with heavy ATV use have been observed to have virtually no native plants or wildlife." Further, BEC estimated that the cost to repair the documented damage which they reviewed in just four State Forests studied would be approximately \$1.45 million. Remind me again why we would want to do this on state lands?

H.B. 5419

At a time where our state needs to create jobs, investing \$1.5 million in the preservation of Community Farms would be both wise and relatively inexpensive. Over 60% of our farms are below 50 acres, and many small farms are involved in direct to consumer retail: bringing fruits, vegetables, meats, and greens to thriving farmers markets and farm stands.

H.B. 5420

In 1913, the Legislature approved the "10 Mill Law" as an early effort to conserve large forested properties. This innovative conservation program capped the landowners' tax rate at 10 mills¹ for a period of 50 years with an opportunity to renew for another 50 years. The program has done well for many years, and 75 landowners remain in the program owning 15,000 acres of forest collectively.

Over time, the 10 Mill program has become an anachronism as land values increased beyond the eligibility threshold of \$100/acre, and as the P.A. 490 program has grown since its creation in 1963 to allow eligible forest, farm, and open space lands to be taxed at their "use

¹ A "mill" is equal to \$1.00 of tax for each \$1,000 of assessment. E.g., a property with an assessed value of \$100,000 located in a municipality with a mill rate of 20 mills would have a property tax bill of \$2,000 per year. The 10 mill rate of this same property would be \$1,000 per year.

value" rather than the fair market "highest and best use" value. Today there are many more properties in P.A. 490 program and, indeed, forest properties can no longer meet the original criteria (value of less than \$100/acre) to enter the 10 Mill program.

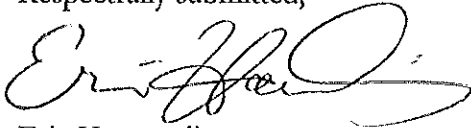
In 1971, the Legislature opened a penalty-free one-year window from October 1972 to October 1973 that would allow 10 Mill landowners to convert their properties to the P.A. 490 program. This provides an option for landowners to keep their properties as forest and keep their tax obligations as low as possible. After all, they provide many community benefits through maintaining the "rural character" that so many communities cherish.

We strongly support this bill which would allow landowners to either convert their properties over to the P.A. 490 program or sell or donate an easement on their properties (to maintain them as forest) without the penalty associated with withdrawing from the 10 mill program prematurely. Premature evacuation from the program would result in the landowner paying a penalty of 5 mills for each year they were in the program, plus their property would be re-assessed by the town based upon both the land value and the standing timber value.

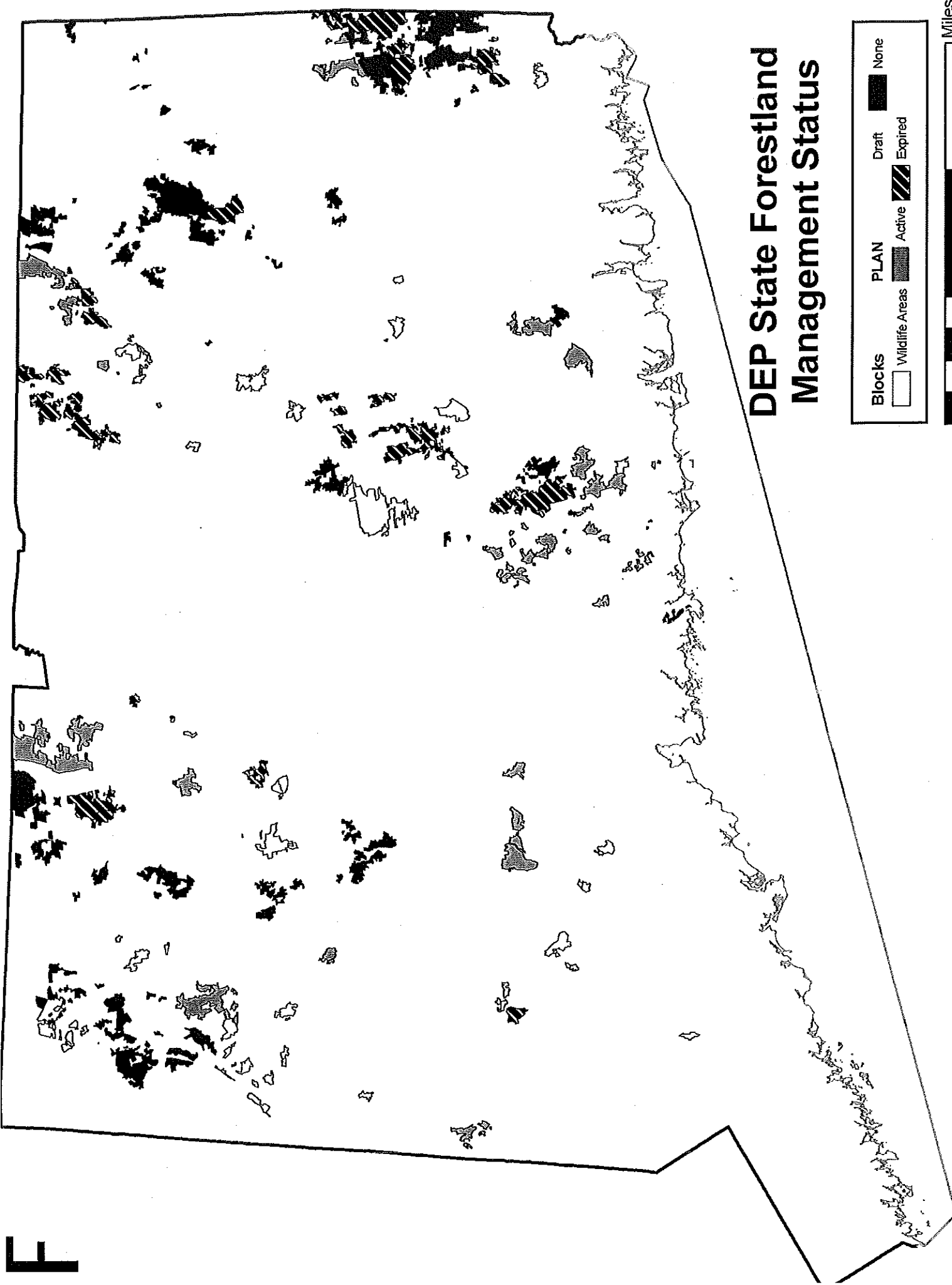
If triggered, the 10 Mill law penalties would probably result in the loss of their properties, the loss of the forests (which would likely be logged to pay the fines), bankruptcy, or all of the above. This would be an unfair and tragic end result for a program that, for nearly a century, has successfully provided incentives to conserve forests in Connecticut!

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eric Hammerling", written in a cursive style.

Eric Hammerling
Executive Director



DEP State Forestland Management Status

Blocks	PLAN	Draft	None
Wildlife Areas	Active	Expired	

